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Sins of the Fathers: Reparations for Slavery

Posted on 27/04/2016 by John Cairns

Regular readers of the this Blog are aware of its interest in slavery. One much debated issue is the question of reparations for the descendants of the enslaved. This raises what are really quite complex issues, which your blogger does not propose to debate here, involving liability for what one's ancestors have done. How can I be personally liable for what my great-grandmother did? There is much more to it than this, of course. And your blogger is not to be understood as airily dismissing the issue.

The argument is rather easier, however, when it comes to institutions; they have continuity as legal persons. Very interesting questions arise out of the recent reporting in the *New York Times* about Georgetown University. In 1838, the Jesuit fathers who ran it sought to save it from ruin by the sale of 272 slaves. The University had acquired slaves and plantations in Maryland in a variety of ways, often by legacy; it now sold the slaves "down the river" (though not literally in this case, as they went by sea) to Louisiana to be sold in New Orleans. Louisiana was a great consumer of slaves in its sugar plantations. See Rachel L. Swarns, "272 Slaves were sold to Save Georgetown. What does it Owe their Descendants?" (16 April, 2016); Editorial, "Georgetown and the Sin of Slavery" *New York Times*, 23 April, 2016. Thanks to detailed records it has proved possible to start to trace these slaves and their descendants.

Slave-ownership in the West Indian plantations was widespread in the Scottish population, as the project on the compensation records carried out at University College London has confirmed. This raises a number of issues. But one Scottish institution that was a slave-owner in Jamaica was of course the Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh. It had received by way of legacy a plantation and slaves under the will of Dr Archibald Ker. The records relating to its slaves are to be found in the archives of the Lothian Health Board.

It is interesting to note that internet searches reveal that every few years the Scottish newspapers discover this "shame", as they like to call it, yet anew as if never known before! But this says more about newspapers and the desire of thrusting academics for "impact" than anything else. See, e.g., "Shame of City's Slavery Profits", *The Scotsman*, 2 Dec. 2006; "Scotland's Slaving History Revealed", *Edinburgh Evening News*, 22 Oct. 2013.

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